

Bereavement and loss

during Covid-19

This pack is aimed at anyone who has experienced a bereavement or loss of a loved one or friend during the Covid-19 outbreak; whether that loss was due to the virus itself or for other reasons, such as an illness, old age or an accident.

Loss of a loved one at any time can be deeply painful and devastating. Moving through our grief may be one of the hardest journeys we will ever have to make. This resource recognises that grief and loss in the time of a global pandemic, involving lockdown and social distancing, will likely make that experience even harder to cope with in many ways.

We also recognise and speak to the multiple losses we are all experiencing at this time, including the loss of a sense of certainty, contact with loved ones and our community, jobs and financial security. These are legitimate losses in their own right which we may grieve for and are things that may make the experience of losing a loved one at this time even more of a challenge.

Everyone will cope with grief differently and each day may feel different. Some sections may be more or less helpful for you to read.

The final sections provide practical coping strategies and links to further resources.

Information collated and authored by Dr Ali Wates and Dr Louise Durant, Clinical Psychologists within Sussex Partnership Foundation Trust (Brighton Assessment and Treatment Service). Please do not reproduce without permission.



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Bereavement and grief

- Bereavement is a term used to describe losing someone important to us, such as a significant relationship which could be with a person or an animal companion, leading to feelings of grief or mourning. We might also feel bereaved following other significant losses, such as losing a home, job, routine or supportive services
- There is no such thing as a "normal" way to grieve and no one way to grieving is better than any other. Grief doesn't come with a manual
- The way we experience, understand and respond to loss and bereavement will likely be connected to our own cultures and beliefs. While there may be a range of shared human responses, these may not all be fully reflected or represented within this document. If you do not relate to some of the experiences described here, that does not mean that your own lived experience is any less valid
- How we are affected by bereavement can depend on many factors such as: our relationship to the person or object; our history of trauma, loss or oppression; our social and material circumstances which may impact our resilience; the availability of shared and collective grief in the form of networks and community, and many other factors
- Grieving or mourning is a normal human experience in response to loss. It is something that we will all encounter at some point in our lives. It is not a problem to be "fixed". Grief is an essential aspect of our humanity, and is deeply embedded in our history as a species.



- Grief reactions can take many forms; we can experience physical changes in the body or changes in the way we feel, think and behave and this can encompass spiritual and sexual domains.
- Grief responses can vary in duration. .
- How we grieve varies hugely from person to person. Some people may find comfort sharing their feelings. Others might prefer to be alone or engage in movement or writing or seek distraction. We all have unique needs when coping with loss. Be kind to yourself and try not to impose "shoulds" on yourself or others such as "I should be crying more" or "I shouldn't feel this sad"
- Our sense of identity (who we are) can change after a loss. A bereavement can feel like a loss of something that makes up who we are e.g. the loss of the role as a family member or friend, or the loss of a job or the loss of health.

Helpful ways to understand the grieving process

Although grief is a very individual process, there may be some shared trends in how people respond and cope with loss. This section provides a brief overview of some models that attempt to describe the grieving process.

These models are not a 'how-to-guide'. They are a description of common, general patterns that have been identified in research. For some people, having a description may help a person to structure and make sense of their own experience. For others this may not feel useful and you may not find this relevant to you. You can choose to skip this section or refer to it at another time.

It is important to note that the grief theories below are not "culture-free" and may not accurately reflect the lived experience within all individual communities and cultures.

The Stages of Grief

Five stages of grief were first suggested by Elisabeth Kubler Ross in the late 1960s to describe common processes people who are grieving experience. Although the process tends to happen in stages that most people will recognise, this is not always the case and some people may revisit certain stages over many years or throughout their life or may not experience all stages. More recently, an additional stage has been added by David Kessler. The stages are:

Denial - (it can be common to experience a feeling of numbness in this stage) A normal reaction to a loss. Denial can help up to pace our feelings of grief; it can protect us from the overwhelm by letting in only as much as we can handle.

Anger: we may not be ready to acknowledge the reality of our loss so we may experience the pain as anger and search to blame or lash out. We might feel guilt too.

Bargaining: we try to make a deal or negotiate with others or a higher power in an attempt to postpone the loss. Its purpose is protective as it enables a temporary escape from the pain of the loss.

Depression: when the reality of the loss is experienced we may experience intense sadness, reduced sleep and appetite and loss of motivation.

Acceptance: we acknowledge the loss and recognise it is permanent. This doesn't mean that we have got over or moved on, or that the end has been reached or that the pain of our loss is any less.

Finding meaning - this isn't about an explanation for how or why a person died but rather how to mark that a person's life and death mattered.

It's important to remember that everyone grieves in their own unique way. There is also no method or way to take away the suffering or messy emotions that come with loss and going through the stages does not mean the end of grief. David Kessler talks about this in a podcast with Brene Brown called 'Unlocking Us'. This can be found here:

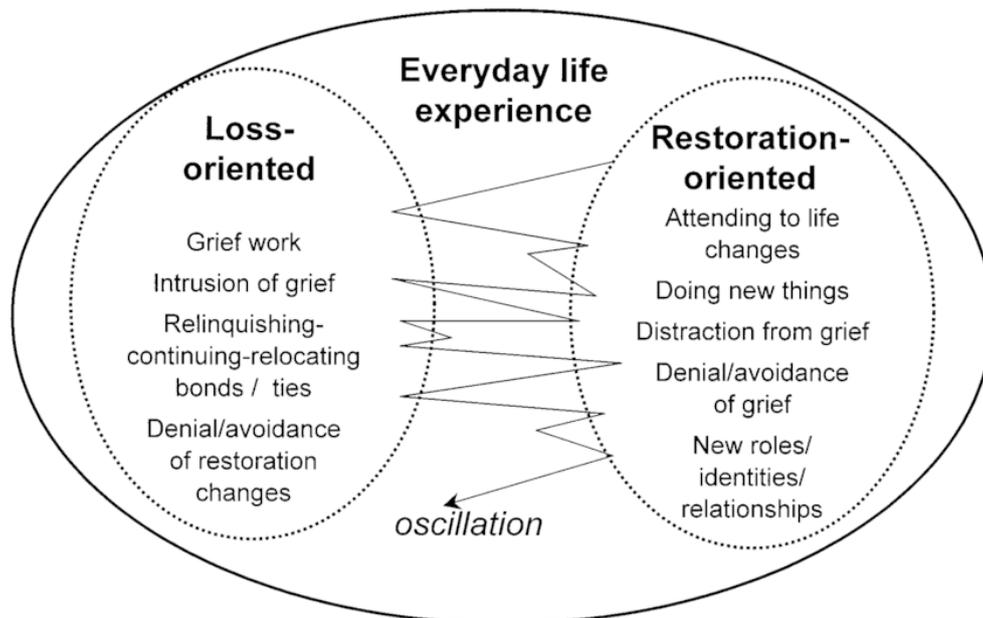
<https://brenebrown.com/podcast/david-kessler-and-brene-on-grief-and-finding-meaning/>

2. Dual process model (Schut, 1999)

This suggests that the actions we take during grief can be broadly put into two categories.

- **Loss-oriented** activities: *actions and feelings related directly to the loss*
For example: crying yearning, sadness, denial or anger, dwelling on the circumstance around a person's death.
- **Restoration-oriented** activities: *restorative actions that are associated indirectly with the loss such as life style, routine or relationship changes.*
For example: adapting to a new role, managing changes in routine, developing new ways to connect with friends and family, activities that might distract from the grief.

People may move between these two types of activities. Therefore, it's important not to feel guilty about times where you are not feeling sad or if you are not thinking about the loss. It's to be expected and it can be part of the grieving process.



3. Continuing Bonds (Klass, Silverman & Nickman, 1996)

Another idea that can be helpful to consider when thinking about the purpose of grieving is the theory of **Continuing Bonds**. This suggests that rather than working towards letting go or cutting ties with a deceased person, we might maintain a bond or connection with them. For example we might continue to hold the person in mind and reflect on what they might have advised in a situation in which we're feeling troubled. Or we might have a special time in the day or our week when we might want to 'talk' to them.

Grief in the context of early experiences and past losses

The context which we grew up in and the early relationships with our care givers shape much of how we understand and interpret the world, even as adults. **This will also likely have an impact on how we experience major events, such as bereavements or any major losses.**

- How we learn to survive emotional pain, especially trauma, when we are young gives us a template for how to cope with the difficulties and stresses we face throughout our lives. We learn certain "survival strategies" or patterns which, at the time, were the best way to feel safe and regain a sense of security.
- Our early experiences also shape what we expect from others and the world, for example: if a parent became severely unwell and spent a lot of time in hospital when we were young, we might hold the belief that other people will leave us suddenly and the world is an unpredictable place. We may



protect ourselves from similar feelings in later life by, for example, by avoiding letting ourselves get close to other people in relationships

- In day-to-day life, we may not always notice these coping styles when things feel relatively stable. They tend to be "activated" in times of stress. During these times we rely on those early strategies which helped us cope in the past, but may not always be helpful in our new and/or different contexts
- Bereavement and loss will likely be stressful times when our early coping strategies are triggered
- Given all of this, **it's understandable if our grief responses don't always appear "rational" to ourselves or those around us.** For example, if we have felt abandoned by others in our past, the death of a loved one at any time can trigger the same painful feelings of rejection and abandonment. This could lead us to react with hurt or anger towards the person who has died, even if we "rationally" understand this is not the same
- Similarly, if we fear being abandoned by others, we may also avoid relying on others for support; we may find we socially withdraw during times of stress, such as during a bereavement
- The way in which our early experiences shape how we behave and relate to others and ourselves during the grieving process will be unique to each individual
- We may have also had a complex relationship with the person who we have lost; for example losing a caregiver who also harmed or abused us in some way. In these situations it can be even harder to process how we are feeling.
 - Their death may also trigger previous losses, such as a loss of a sense of safety or a happy childhood. It may trigger complex feelings such as anger, confusion, guilt or shame.
 - If this is the case for you and you're finding that you're still struggling some months down the line, you might want to consider seeking support from a bereavement counsellor. **See details for CRUSE on page 18**

Previous losses

- Loss in the present can trigger feelings of loss in the past, even if they seem unconnected. This is especially true if we have not felt able or had the opportunity to process our previous losses, or if it was a complex loss. For example, the sudden loss of our health or employment at this time can trigger the same feelings associated with the trauma, fear and chaos of losing a

caregiver, relative or friend in the past. This may also help explain why this current situation of living through a pandemic may feel so overwhelming.

Allowing ourselves to feel

- It's important to remember that our protective strategies are there for a reason, to protect us. Denial, anger or bargaining after a death can help us avoid the deeper sadness we may be feeling underneath. Be kind to yourself and acknowledge this is our mind's way of trying to protect us from emotional pain.
- We also may have internalised messages all our life from our caregivers and society that our "true feelings" such as pain, sadness or grief are unacceptable. We may therefore find many different ways to avoid, suppress or hide those feelings from others or ourselves.
- Finding space to acknowledge the pain, loss and sadness behind the protective strategies we use can allow us to feel, move through, and process our loss.
 - If we don't allow ourselves to feel our grief at some point, we may find we carry it around with us as emotional or physical pain. For example, unprocessed grief can be experienced as migraines, chronic pain or uncontrollable mood swings.



Healing isn't always about feeling *better* immediately; it can just be about feeling *more*.

Some people find they do not feel able to grieve for losses until they feel safe, secure or relatively emotionally stable.

It might be helpful to seek support in opening up; this might be in the form of a caring relative, a trusted friend, a mental health

practitioner or a specialist bereavement counsellor.

Grief and loss in the time of Covid-19 and social distancing

Losing a loved one can be devastating at any time; experiencing a death of someone close to us during the corona virus outbreak can be even more difficult. These are unprecedented times, causing many people uncertainty and a range of additional stressors, possibly already leaving us with fewer emotional resources. While there may also be some comfort in the shared and collective grief during this time, here are some of the reasons that experiencing loss and bereavement may feel understandably harder to cope with during Covid-19:

Final moments

- We may have not been able to be physically alongside our loved ones at the time of their deaths. Being there for the final moments is often seen as a chance to reaffirm bonds, showing gratitude, resolving shared misunderstandings or have final meaningful conversations. Even though this was due to strict rules enforced by the Government and NHS to help protect everyone, we may still experience deep distress, regret or even guilt around this.
 - As noted in the sections above, it's normal to feel a range of emotions, including anger, resentment, longing and guilt at times, during any bereavement. These feelings and emotions may be magnified if we were not able to say goodbye to a loved one, or if our time together at the end was limited. Remember to try and be kind to yourself and remind yourself this was being asked of you by your whole community.

Disrupted rituals and ceremonies around death

- Rituals and ceremonies around death, such as funerals or memorials, may have been disrupted or limited as part of social distancing. These events help us mark and process endings or transitions in our lives. This gives us the opportunity to join others in shared grief, as well as celebrate the life of the person who has died - both of which can bring comfort to those of us who mourn them.
- Missing out on these opportunities, or having them limited may make us feel more alone with our grief or mean we find it harder to acknowledge the end of someone's life. See the section "**what can help**" below for ways to help cope with this during lockdown and social distancing.

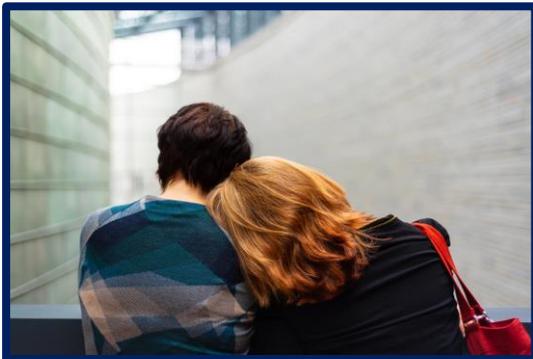


Social and health inequalities

- We may be feeling unsafe ourselves and fearing for our own lives during this pandemic, which may make it hard to make space for grieving. This may be especially relevant for people who may be more vulnerable to covid-19. For example:
 - If we experience a chronic health condition, such as diabetes or COPD.
 - If we experience social inequalities in our lives which could put us more at risk; for example, if we are living in areas of high deprivation or poor-quality high density housing.
 - If we have no choice but to continue to go out to work in high risk environments.
- The sense of powerlessness in this the situation may mean we feel less able to take on the challenges of working through emotional and practical tasks of grieving.
- These experiences may activate our threat responses and mean we focus on survival ("fight, flight or freeze" modes) rather than having space for the mourning process. There is a possibility this could lead to a delayed grief response at a later point when we feel more able to allow ourselves the space to grieve.

Anticipatory grief

Death of a loved one or even deaths in our wider community can also mean many of us will be facing fears around our own mortality, or those we care about. This can feel really scary and bring up a lot of fear and distress. Though challenging, sometimes being open and curious to some of these difficult feelings can help us build emotional strength in the long run. It can be helpful to try to find a balance between acknowledging our fear and anticipated grief "*name it and claim it*", and becoming overwhelmed by these feelings. **Do what feels safe for you at this time.**

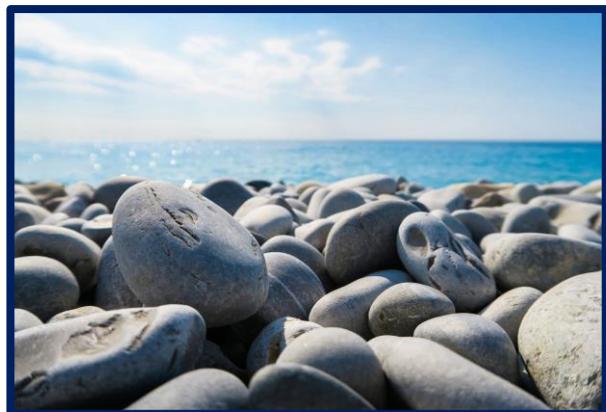


Limited coping resources

Lockdown and social distancing rules may mean we do not have our usual support networks around us. We may not be able to receive comfort from others at this difficult time, for example by being hugged or holding hands. Physical and emotional separation from our loved ones can be distressing when we are in need of emotional support.

This can be particularly difficult if we struggle to know how to comfort ourselves in difficult times. It may be helpful to practice soothing self-touch, such as a butterfly hug (**see additional covid-19 coping pack**)

- On the other hand, we may not have the privacy or physical space from others in our household to authentically grieve our loss. Especially if we feel we have to "stay strong" for other people around us. Try to remember that showing our vulnerability and sadness in times of grief is not a sign of weakness. It can also help encourage/ give permission for others to do the same and help everyone work through their loss.
- As described in the Dual Process Model (on page 6) it can be important to be able to engage in a balance between mourning and other activities which take us away from our pain, or help us find new meaning in our lives.
- When our opportunities for "restorative" activities are limited due to lockdown and social distancing, this can mean we have more time just to focus on our loss and sadness. Try to remember you should not feel guilty for doing tasks which take you away from your grief at times, and find ways to do this within the imposed limits. Spending time in nature or with other people, in whatever way possible, can be particularly helpful at these times.



Constant reminders

- As [CRUSE](#) note: coronavirus is constantly in the news headlines and everywhere on social media. We might be constantly reminded of our loss or possibly the traumatic nature of their death. We may over time become disturbed by our own mental images of these scenes; it might feel as if we're re-experiencing what happened again, such as having flashbacks, nightmares or avoiding any hospital visits. At this time, try to reduce your daily news and media intake.

Wider losses during this time

- As discussed above, grief and loss can be experienced about anything meaningful to us
 - We might be experiencing wider or multiple losses all at the same time which again may mean we have less emotional resilience overall. This can make coping with bereavement even harder to bear. These losses can be deeply distressing in their own right as well; for example, losing physical connection to our networks and community; access to our children and grandchildren; jobs; routines; financial security; support services or a sense of "certainty" about the world.
- You may have lost something suddenly and you feel unfairly, like your job or had an important life event cancelled, such as a wedding.
- Our grief will relate to the meaning we placed on the thing that we lost. For example, losing a job or being furloughed, or unpaid care roles (such as taking care of grandchildren) can all trigger difficult feelings. For many people this is due to the connections we make between our work, roles and our self-esteem. We may feel that our worth and value to others comes from our role as a "provider", "bread winner", "carer" or "boss". We may be evaluating ourselves as "worthless" if we can no longer fulfil these roles.



- Wider losses during times of wide spread tragedy and community suffering could also trigger feelings of "ambiguous loss". This refers to loss where there is no clear closure or real understanding of what has happened. This can leave us with feelings of powerlessness, frustration and hopelessness. In turn, this may keep us locked in a cycle of grief. The lack of certainty and "unnamed dread" may interact with feelings related to unresolved trauma in other times in our life. When trying to deal with this feeling of uncertainty, it can be helpful to "name it and claim it" which may reduce some of the power the feeling has over us.

What can help?

Below are some practical strategies to help with bereavement at any time, but may be especially helpful during covid-19 when we may not be able to say goodbye in person.

Marie Curie have listed "seven ways to say goodbye to a loved one without words" which offer some helpful suggestions if you were not there to say goodbye in person:

<https://www.mariecurie.org.uk/blog/ways-to-say-goodbye/200035>

SAYING GOODBYE WITHOUT WORDS



GO SOMEWHERE SPECIAL

Go a special place that had memories for you both, or reminds you of them in some way which can help you feel closer to them

WRITE A GOODBYE LETTER

Tell them how you feel by writing it down. You can write anything you want and you can either keep the letter as a reminder or throw it away to help you process the grief.



DO WHAT MATTERS

1) Do something that mattered to you and your loved one (listening to their favourite song, watching their favourite film, reading their favourite book, looking at old photographs)

TRY MUSIC

Music can help you relax, it can remind you or it can help you to forget. Choose some music to listen to and let your mind wander.



GET INVOLVED

Start something that matters. Some people start projects in their loved one's memories such as doing a sponsored race to raise money for charity or volunteering

GET OUTSIDE

1) Spend time in the garden or outdoors- the natural world reminds us of lifecycles. You can also chose a flower with a symbolic meaning to plant in their memory; for example sweetpeas symbolise gratitude



TRY SOME POETRY

Read or write a goodbye poem. There are lots to choose from if you don't feel like writing your own.

Stay connected

It is an important part of many cultures and faiths to perform activities, rituals or ceremonies (such as funerals or memorials) which mark the end of someone's life. Marking of transitions helps us to achieve a sense of closure, make meaning of difficult events and share our suffering with others. An important part of these ceremonies is being with our social networks and communities.

Other ideas

- If gathering people together was limited during Covid-19, try and connect as much as you can online or on the phone. For example, try and get a group of people together who would have attended the funeral on a video call to share memories of your loved one or have some kind of memorial.
- Try and ensure to make time to recreate something in person once lockdown and social distancing rules have been lifted.
- If you are not able to attend the funeral, see if someone can live stream or film the funeral.
- Light a candle or do something to mark the time it is taking place if you can't be there.
- If we can't be there for each other physically, try other ways of connecting, for example sending videos or voice notes.



Try to keep a routine and meet your basic needs

- CRUSE bereavement specialists suggest the following for grieving in isolation: "This can sound obvious but at these times it is so easy to want to hide away. We are being encouraged to! But do try and get some fresh air or sunlight each day - even opening a window can help. If you are allowed, go for a walk or run, or do some exercise in your home - exercise can be really helpful. Try to keep to a regular routine of getting up and dressed and eating meals at the usual time, whether you are on your own or part of a family group. The structure will help, even if only a little."
<https://www.cruse.org.uk/coronavirus/grieving-and-isolation>
- Ask for help; even if people can't give you physical comfort, ask them to drop round food, water your garden or take care of admin tasks for you. The people around you will likely want to support you however they can.

Acknowledge your strengths and resilience

- The American Psychological Society (APA) remind us that "Grief is natural, and we are resilient". They suggest to take time to acknowledge your individual and collective (as a family, friendship group or community) strengths in the face of grief. Write about your personal and collective strengths and coping skills that may help you get through this difficult time. It might help to remind ourselves of other losses we have had in the past and how we coped with them, such as periods of mental health stress, divorce, job losses etc
<https://www.apa.org/news/apa/2020/04/grief-covid-19>

You don't need to compare yourself

- Don't feel you need to compare yourself to others who you think may be suffering more during the pandemic; there's nothing more real than our own pain. Allowing yourself to feel is an important part of the journey to healing

These are just a few examples of what can help. There are many more out there. See the links to a range of resources on **page 18**

Complex or traumatic grief

There is no "normal" way to grieve; everyone will be different and every day will likely feel different. Your grief may feel like a rollercoaster of better and worse days for quite some time. Try to not be too quick to "diagnose" your pain and suffering. Losing someone under any circumstances is tragic and doing so in a pandemic or to coronavirus can be even more difficult.



Give yourself time to move through the natural and painful process of grief.

However, there may be times where our loss feels harder to process and we find ourselves being overwhelmed or "stuck" in our painful feelings for a long time.

This may be especially true if there were losses in the past we have not processed or because of a complex relationship to the person we lost. This also may be more likely to happen if there were traumatic circumstances around the death of a loved one, **which may be relevant to losing someone suddenly from coronavirus.**

If you feel you are struggling and would like further support to process your bereavement you can:

- Speak to someone within your mental health team, such as your Lead Practitioner for additional coping resources.
- You can contact CRUSE bereavement specialists.

Their **free** National Freephone Helpline is available on **0808 808 1677**.

Opening hours are Monday-Friday 9.30-5pm (excluding bank holidays), with extended hours on Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday evenings, when they are open until 8pm. You can self-refer for specialist bereavement counselling through them.

<https://www.cruse.org.uk/>

Further resources

Below are some links to websites that may be helpful sources of support and information.

The Brighton and Hove council website provide links to a range of local and national resources on bereavement <https://new.brighton-hove.gov.uk/births-deaths-marriages-civil-partnership-and-citizenship/bereavement-service-contacts-and>

CRUSE Bereavement Care is a charity which offers free information and advice to anyone who has been affected by a death. They also provide emotional support and counselling on a one-to-one basis and in groups.

Website: <https://www.cruse.org.uk/get-help/coronavirus-dealing-bereavement-and-grief>

- If you live in Brighton and Hove (or surrounding areas) please contact:
Telephone: 01273 234007 Email: Brighton@cruse.org.uk
- If you live in Eastbourne (or surrounding areas) please contact: Telephone:
01323 642942 Email: EastbourneBranch@cruse.org.uk

Mind

<https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/guides-to-support-and-services/bereavement/about-bereavement/>

The Good Grief Trust

<https://www.thegoodgrieftrust.org/>

Advice on saying goodbye from Marie Curie

<https://www.mariecurie.org.uk/blog/ways-to-say-goodbye/200035>

Brighton and Sussex University Hospitals guide "Your Bereavement Living Through It"

<https://www.bsuh.nhs.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/5/2016/09/Your-Bereavement-Living-Through-It.pdf>

Black Minds Matter

Black Minds Matter funds free therapy and connects black people with black therapists, specifically for black trauma. As discussed above, there may be trauma related to the disproportionate number deaths in communities of colour, during the covid-19 pandemic

<https://www.blackmindsmatteruk.com/>

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